

Top global challenges in mental health identified

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Mental health experts are calling for a greater world focus on improving access to care and treatment for mental, neurological, and substance use (MNS) disorders, as well as increasing discoveries in research that will enable this goal to be met.

The Grand Challenges in Global [Mental Health](#) Initiative, led by the National Institutes of Health and the Global Alliance for [Chronic Diseases](#), has identified the top 40 barriers to better mental health around the world. Similar to past grand challenges, which focused on [infectious diseases](#) and chronic, [noncommunicable diseases](#), this initiative seeks to build a community of funders dedicated to supporting research that will significantly improve the lives of people living with MNS disorders within the next 10 years.

Twenty-five of the specific challenges and the process used to derive them are described in an article that will be published on July 7, 2011, in the journal *Nature*.

"Participating in global mental health research is an enormous opportunity, a means to accelerate advances in [mental health care](#) for the diverse U.S. population, as well as an extension of our vision of a world where [mental illnesses](#) are prevented and cured," said Thomas R. Insel, M.D., director of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), the NIH institute heading this effort.

According to the paper's authors, the disorders targeted by the Grand

Challenges in Global Mental Health—for example, schizophrenia, depression, epilepsy, dementia, and alcohol dependence—collectively account for more years of life lost to poor health, disability, or early death than either cardiovascular disease or cancer. Yet, compared to illnesses like cardiovascular disease and cancer, there are far fewer effective treatments or preventive methods. In addition, interventions are not widely available to those who need them most.

In recognizing the need to address this imbalance, Pamela Collins, M.D., M.P.H., of the NIMH Office for Research on Disparities and Global Mental Health, and colleagues assembled an international panel of experts to identify research priorities using the Delphi method, a widely accepted consensus-building tool. The panel consisted of 422 experts in fields such as neuroscience, basic behavioral science, mental health services, and epidemiology, and represented more than 60 countries.

Over the course of two months, NIMH staff pared the panel's initial list of 1,565 challenges down to 154, with input from a scientific advisory board. From this list, the expert panel selected the top 40, of which the top five challenges identified after the third and final round of ranking are:

- Integrate screening and core packages of services into routine primary health care
- Reduce the cost and improve the supply of effective medications
- Improve children's access to evidence-based care by trained health providers in low- and middle-income countries
- Provide effective and affordable community-based care and rehabilitation

- Strengthen the mental health component in the training of all health care personnel.

These top five challenges were ranked according to the ability to reduce the burden of disease, ability to reduce inequalities in health and health care, length of time until results can be observed, and the ability for the topic to be researched effectively.

"Addressing these challenges could have far-reaching effects, including increasing access to services and ultimately, reducing the treatment gap associated with these disorders," said Dr. Collins.

More information: Collins PY, Patel V, Joestl SS, March D, Insel TR, Daar A, on behalf of the Grand Challenges in Global Mental Health Scientific Advisory Board and Executive Committee. Grand Challenges in Global Mental Health. *Nature*. 2011 July 7. 474 (7354)

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